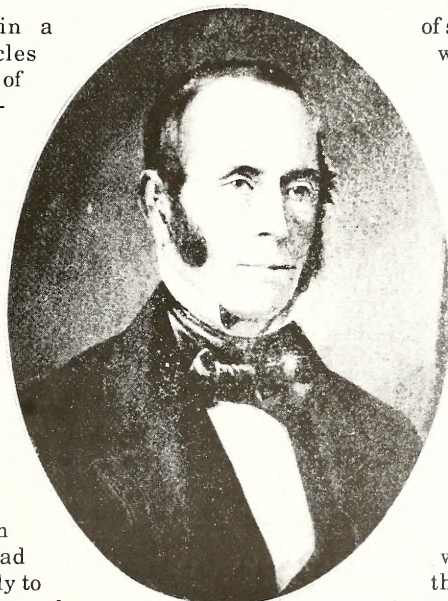


SERIES OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

by Gary Gentry

This is the first in a series of articles recounting the story of 19th century Elsay - its settlement, founding, and growth, and the hopes and frustrations of its residents. It is also the story of Elsay's encounter with two major 19th century trends - rising commercialism and industrialization. The story unfolds in five stages: from the settlement and founding of the village from 1818-1851, to the arrival and influence of General James Semple in the early 1850's, through an era of rapid community growth from 1855-1879, into the railroad boom of the 1880's, and finally to the promises and frustrations of the 1890's.



Gen. James Semple

of smaller industries and businesses were also to thrive within Elsay's boundaries. The search for business prosperity and growth was, to a great extent, the result of a vision held by the village founder, General James Semple. General Semple saw Elsay as a bustling, commercial center along the Mississippi River, rivaling its downriver neighbor, Alton.

These articles will try to capture the images of Elsay during the 19th century - presenting the major events and townspeople which were crucial to the development of Elsay. Because of limited space there will be details of this period that will be missed - but fortunately, those are the makings of other stories.

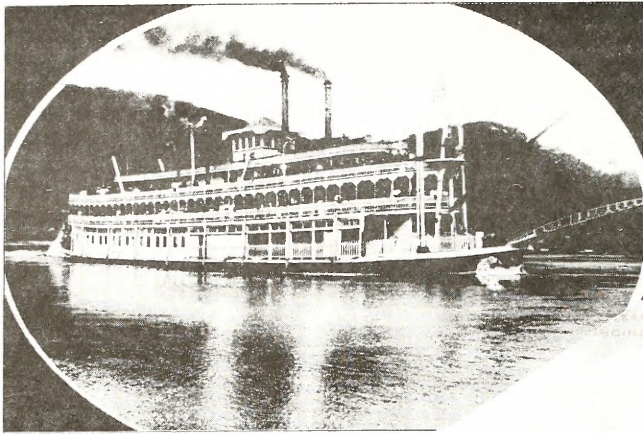
Anyone familiar with Elsay today knows the village has managed to maintain the charming serenity and quaintness of the 1800's. To the interested observer, Elsay stands as a living laboratory of 19th century architecture and ambiance, with its narrow streets and closely spaced Gothic Revival houses. Yet, the Elsay of 1993 is, in many ways, much different from the Elsay of 1893.

During the 19th century, Elsay (or Jersey Landing as it was most commonly called until the 1880's) became the central river shipping point for Jersey County. What might be surprising to us today is the pro-business attitude of Elsay's 19th century residents, and their active pursuit of new enterprises. The village became home to several industries, including the largest distillery-flour mill complex in the southern region of Illinois. A variety

THE EARLIEST YEARS: 1818-1851

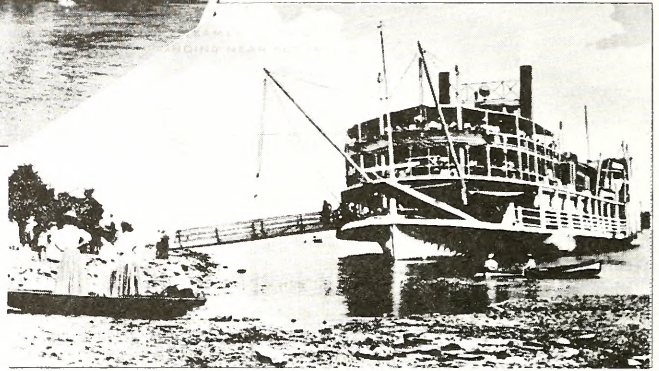
Almost 200 years before Elsay appeared on any map, and well before white settlers began to occupy the Elsay riverfront, the limestone cliffs near the village witnessed the passage of many strangers in a new land. The earliest European explorers of North America's interior were from France. The first to pass by the Elsay bluffs were Joliet and Marquette, who paddled down the Mississippi River beneath the Elsay bluffs in 1673. A few years later, the French explorers LaSalle and Joutel also stopped near the same bluffs that Marquette had earlier described as "ruined castles."

In 1767, the view from the top of the bluffs included the only Spanish fort to be established as far north as Missouri - Fort St. Charles the Prince. The



Left - Steamer "J.S." which served Jersey Landing/Elsah area. Courtesy of Lucy McDow.

Below - Excursion steamer "Alton" along the Mississippi River near Jersey Landing, Elsay.



Fort could be seen to the southwest, perched on the crest of the Missouri River bluffs, across the wide river bottomlands of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers.

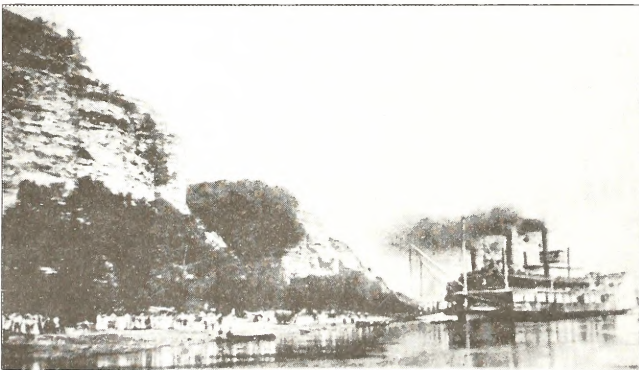
Americans finally came within sight of these bluffs during May, 1804, as the Lewis and Clark Expedition began its journey west up the Missouri River to explore and chart the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. As the expedition camped along the Missouri River near present day Pelican Island, Meriwether Lewis reported seeing "white cliffs" to the north. And a few years later, these same cliffs saw Captain Zebulon Pike (of Pike's Peak fame) lead American troops upriver along the Mississippi toward the unexplored Minnesota Territory as he searched for the headwaters of the Mississippi.

The story of 19th century Elsay was a record of ongoing change and adaptation. At the turn of the

19th century, Jersey County, Illinois, which included the Elsay area, consisted of timbered, rolling landscape, occasionally broken by ravines and valleys, and bordered on the south by 300-400 foot high limestone bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. As yet, the land had been unmarked by either agriculture or industry.

In 1813, just across the river from the Elsay location, was the village of Portage des Sioux. At this spot a meeting was taking place between the Governor of the Missouri Territory, William Clark, and two thousand Indians who had been fighting as allies of the British against the Americans during the War of 1812. The meeting with Governor Clark marked the end of widespread Indian hostilities in the Missouri/Illinois section of the Mississippi Valley, and allowed the coming migration of settlers to take place in relative peace.

Thus, the first stage in Elsay's history was set to begin in a quiet and somewhat inauspicious way. The era would take the village from 1818, the time of the first white settler's arrival, through 33 years of settlement to 1851, a year which saw the emergence of a clear vision for Elsay, as seen through the eyes of its early residents.



One of the daily steamboats landing up river from Jersey Landing/Elsah

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During the year 1817-18, the area's first white settlers arrived starting with Josiah Cummings, John Carroll, and William Bates, and closely followed by John Thompson and Colonel Josiah T. Askew. Soon after his arrival, John Carroll became the first "owner" of land along this stretch of Mississippi River shoreline, recording his claim to a tract of land in Section 15, Township 6 North, Range 11 West of Jersey County (this will be referred to as "Township 6" from here on). He proceeded to build a cabin on this section as his permanent residence (see map). Later in the spring of 1823 Carroll's brother, William, was to have the additional but dubious distinction as the first white man to die in the area.

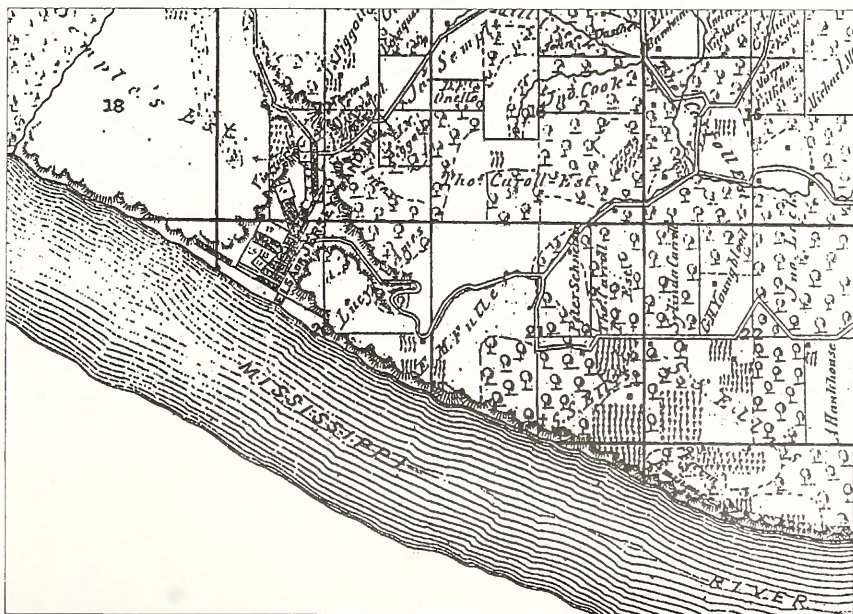
These earliest settlers emigrated from a variety of locations and brought diverse backgrounds to the area. For example, Josiah Cummings was a native of Connecticut. Prior to traveling to Jersey County, Cummings had served in the Revolutionary War at the Battle of Bennington (Vermont) as a militiaman with the Green Mountain Boys. Another of the early settlers, William Bates, originally came from North Carolina, locating first in Madison County, Illinois, during times of trouble between native tribes and white settlers. He arrived just before the "Wood River Massacre" of July, 1814, in which a mother and

six children were killed and scalped by a marauding tribe from central Illinois. In 1821, Bates' daughter, Hanna married another of the original residents of the Township, Colonel Josiah T. Askew. This was the first recorded marriage for the Township. The Askews also were blessed with the first birth in Township 6, a daughter in 1823.

Colonel Josiah T. Askew was a native of Tennessee, having served in the War of 1812, leaving the Tennessee militia with the rank of Colonel. Askew was said to be of spare, but erect, stature, "well mounted on a favorite horse, ... and never failed to leave due impression on the audience." He was a man of considerable learning and was a prominent part of the Illinois Baptist Societies of the time.

As the 1820's progressed, the few residents of Township 6 witnessed the beginnings of a community structure and organization. The first Justice of the Peace for the Township, Joseph Bassey, was appointed (or perhaps elected, for the records are unclear) in 1822. The Township's first school was opened in 1825.

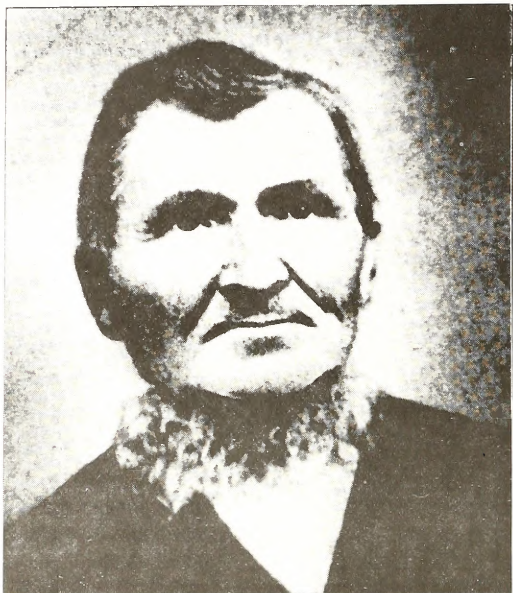
Township 6 also saw the arrival of significant new residents in the mid-1820's, one of whom was James Mason, who had already appeared in the Jersey County area in 1818. Mason first settled in Township 6 at a site near present day Grafton. By 1827, Mason had made his attachment to the Elsah area by purchasing a tract of land which included what later was to be referred to as "lower Elsah". In April, 1828, Mason officially entered his ownership



Sections 15-22,
Township 6, Jersey
County, Illinois
[From Atlas Map
of Jersey County,
Illinois (Davenport:
Andreas Lyter & Co.,
1872)]

of this property in Jersey County records as "35 acres in Section 20, Township 6, Range 11" (see map).

The next eight years were a relatively quiet period. In 1836, Colonel Josiah T. Askew entered the official property listings of Jersey County. He purchased a tract of land in Township 6 and constructed a camp to harvest sugar. This tract included the northern portions of the Elsah valley and would later be referred to as "upper Elsah". Because of Colonel Askew's purchase, Elsah valley acquired the name



Addison Greene, taken from an early portrait. Courtesy of Edna Reiger.

"Askew Hollow", and the creek running through the valley to the Mississippi River became "Askew Creek".

By the 1840's, new faces rapidly began appearing on the scene. These new arrivals became the first residents who would leave marks on the Elsah area that remain to this day. One of these new emigrants was Addison Greene. Greene arrived along the Mississippi at the foot of Askew Hollow in 1847. He built himself a cabin on the waterfront of what was then known as "Jersey Landing", a name which had been in local usage for some time. In later years Greene's modest cabin was expanded into the Riverview Hotel. After existing in a variety of forms, it now stands as present day Elsah's oldest building, serving as a private residence known as "Riverview House".

The decade of the 1850's saw the arrival of

additional new residents to Jersey Landing/Elsah, which had already become the principal grain shipping point for Jersey County, as well as a major fuel stop for steamboats travelling the Mississippi River. One of these new arrivals, General James Semple, was quickly to become the guiding figure for the village and its most significant 19th century citizen. James Semple arrived at Jersey Landing in 1851, and by 1852 had purchased a large piece of land from a group of property owners including William H. Allen (the first Justice of the Peace for Grafton), Addison Green, and assorted smaller landholders. The Semple tract covered Sections 18, 19, and 20 of Township 6 (see map), and included what was to become the village proper for Elsa/Jersey Landing ("Elsa" was the early spelling of Elsah).

The arrival of General Semple in 1851 thus marked the beginning of a new era in Elsah's history, a time which would see the General's vision for a Mississippi River community take physical shape in Askew Hollow. The next article in this series will deal with this formative stage in Elsah's history - the arrival and influence of General James Semple, from 1851-1855.

[Gary R. Gentry is an Assistant Professor of History at Principia College. For the past few years he has been engaged in research on 19th century Elsah. This article and those to follow in this series are taken from Mr. Gentry's research.]

Village events this past year...

- Craft shows in the Village Hall in spring and fall;
- Hanging of the Greens this past December, a bi-annual event which involves the entire Village of Elsah and includes a craft show in the Village Hall and a home tour. This event is for the benefit of the United Methodist Church;
- Our Annual Christmas Sing sponsored by the United Methodist Church, the Christian Science Church, and Historic Elsah Foundation, followed by refreshments in the Village Hall;
- A New Year's Eve party in the Village Hall for the young people of the Village hosted by Susan Mack;
- A pot luck supper in January, 1993, in the Village Hall, sponsored by Historic Elsah Foundation. This event was well attended and all enjoyed Betty McIntire's slide show "Art and Christmas."